

## ***Deseret News***

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### **Kudos for Supporting Legal Center**

By John A. Adams

The Utah State Legislature in the just-completed session has stepped forward in a year of very difficult financial challenges and, in honor of their colleague the late Sen. Pete Suazo, appropriated \$100,000 toward the purchase of a building to create the nation's first Community Legal Center.

Sen. Suazo, who represented Salt Lake's urban and diverse District 2, was admired by his Senate colleagues for his tireless efforts for equal access to justice for all of Utah's citizens. The Community Legal Center will be located in Sen. Suazo's district and is a project of the state's leading providers of free civil legal services to lower-income individuals and families -- the Disability Law Center, the Legal Aid Society of Salt Lake and Utah Legal Services. Their efforts, like those of Sen. Suazo, promote economic and family stability, fight injustice and help people help themselves.

These three agencies, which have a total of 35 lawyers and 84 staff employees, last year provided legal advice or represented clients in disputes in over 21,000 legal matters. The agencies resolve serious legal problems for those with no place else to turn -- the poor, ethnic minorities, seniors and people with disabilities. The building will also house two smaller volunteer-based programs, the Multi-Cultural Law Center and the Senior Lawyer Volunteer Project.

Each of these not-for-profit legal service providers has a specific mission or client base: Utah Legal Services focuses legal assistance to the state's low-income residents; Legal Aid Society assists clients with domestic relations and domestic violence issues in Salt Lake County; Disability Law Center focuses on assistance to people with physical and mental disabilities; the Senior Lawyer Volunteer Project assists elderly individuals with estate planning and end-of-life issues; and the Multi-Cultural Law Center provides a variety of legal aid to Utah's growing ethnic communities.

To their credit, these groups have been a model of cooperation and innovation to improve efficiencies in the delivery of legal services in our state. Several years ago they formed the "and Justice for All"

campaign, which raises money from members of the private Utah State Bar. Utah's lawyers and law firms are among the most generous in the nation; more than \$1.5 million has been raised since the campaign began.

Co-location helps the agencies meet three important goals.

First, "one-stop shopping" will make access to legal aid and our nation's system of justice easier for Utahns.

Second, it will allow the agencies to share some staff and services to achieve efficiencies of operation.

Last, it will provide greater opportunity for volunteer service by private attorneys and law students. It should be noted that two of these agencies also have offices in Ogden, Provo and Cedar City so that legal needs elsewhere in the state may be served.

The former Morrison and Merrill Building located at 205 N. 400 West is the site of the new Community Legal Center. The 30,000-square-foot building was recently refurbished by its prior owner, the Olafson Group, which generously donated \$400,000 toward the \$4 million project.

The appropriation of \$100,000 sends a clear message that Utah's legislators and Gov. Mike Leavitt are willing to lead out and not just give lip service to helping Utahns obtain access to our legal system. It is hoped that the example of our political leaders, coupled with the generous contributions already made by organizations and individuals, including the George S. and Dolores Dore Eccles Foundation, the Utah Bar Foundation, the Herbert I. and Else B. Michael Foundation, the cities of Salt Lake and Murray, and the agencies, employees and boards of trustees, will prompt other foundations, businesses and private citizens to contribute the remaining funds necessary to pay for the purchase of the building.

Apart from the capital campaign that is now under way, Utah lawyers are making a major difference in helping increase access to justice. Last year more than a third of the members of the Utah State Bar contributed to the "and Justice for All" campaign, and more than \$440,000 was raised to help these agencies operate and perform their vital mission.

People pulling together for a common worthwhile cause makes all the difference, but leadership starts at the top. Thanks to our Legislature for leading out in difficult financial times.

John A. Adams is president-elect of the Utah State Bar.